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Thomas Mcoy, no second C, is a name you've probably never seen. Maybe you've spotted "Tommy M." buried in the acknowledgments of a bestseller or scrawled on a Starbucks cup while he tapped away on a Chromebook in a corner booth. But you won't find his name on a book cover.

Tommy, you see, is the best ghostwriter in America. Maybe the world.

The book about the astronaut who battled alcoholism? Tommy.

The one by the Yankee who named names with too much pride? Also Tommy.

Fourteen CEOs, each with a different spin on leadership: “The Pyramid of Power,” “The Confidence Column,” “The Effectiveness Spectrum”? All Tommy’s inventions.

He wrote the last thirteen *Wingnut Wilson* thrillers and four of the last five presidential memoirs. He even filled in on the *Wilson the Dog* comic strip for two months in 2006 when Dan Harkins had shingles.

He could write anything except, apparently, his own story.

Which is how I got involved.

I’m Ted McGinn. Adjunct professor at a third-tier state school in New Jersey. Once upon a time, I was a go-to guy for media tie-ins. I wrote five mysteries based on *Police: NY*, two sci-fi trilogies for the *Planet Force 9* franchise, and twelve paperback romances spun off from the soap opera *Almost Kissed*. Hack work, sure, but it paid for some decent real estate in Jersey City and gave me just enough credibility to teach people who still believed writing could save them.

Then one Thursday morning, I got a call.

“Is this Professor Ted McGinn?”

The voice was gravelly, amused, and somehow familiar.

“This is Thomas Mcoy. I need your help.”

We met at a diner off Route 17, where the booths still had real leather and the waitresses called everyone “hon.” Tommy was already seated, a half-empty coffee mug in front of him and a yellow legal pad filled with scribbles.

He looked like someone’s retired uncle, part office job, part Little League coach. Heavy black glasses hiding heavier eyes, a windbreaker, and a Yankees hat that had seen

better days suggested nothing of his bibliography. The only giveaway was the pen. Montblanc. Heavy. Glossy. Like a knife someone meant to keep sharpened. A gift, I assumed, from one of his famous friends.

“You’re taller than I thought,” he said, not looking up.

“I get that a lot,” I said, which I don’t.

He gestured to the seat across from him. “Thanks for coming. I know this is weird.”

“Weird’s relative,” I said. “You wrote the Secretary of Agriculture’s memoir, didn’t you?”

“Ghosted it, yeah,” he said. “But this time I’m trying to do something different.”

He slid a thin folder across the table. Inside was a rough outline: Early Life, The Work, Regret, Maybe Love? Each section had three or four bullet points, but they were vague, hesitant. The notes of a man who’d spent a lifetime writing other people’s stories and now had no idea how to tell his own.

“You said on the phone you had writer’s block,” I said.

“It’s worse than that,” he said. “It’s like I don’t exist unless I write for

someone else. I can’t find the angle on myself. Everything I start sounds fake or pompous or like a press release.”

“And you want me to...?”

“Help me find the thread,” he said. “You wrote this line in *The Interrupted Vacation*, about how love perseveres, even through regret. That one got under my skin. You ever read something and wish you wrote it yourself?”

I shrugged. “I don’t read many soap opera tie-ins.”

Tommy smiled. “You’ve never been stuck for two days in a Romanian airport with no cell service and a

newsstand where the only book in English you didn’t write is *The Interrupted Vacation*?”

“That’s the kind of irony I wish my students understood,” I joked.

The waitress came by with coffee. He ordered another black. I asked for a Sprite and a ham and cheese on rye.

“You know,” I said, “I’m still trying to figure out why you called me. There are better writers. Cleaner prose. Bigger names.”

“Maybe. But none of them know how to get past the cornball and hit the nerve,” he said. “Your books

have heart. Even when they’re ridiculous.”

“That’s generous,” I said, unsure whether I was being complimented or insulted.

He looked up at me then, and his voice softened. “It’s not. I’ve spent my whole life writing what other people want. You wrote what someone needed.”

We sat with that.

Then he added, “Besides, there’s something about you. Like we’ve met before.”

I gave him a look.

He backtracked. “Not literally. Just… something about the way you write feels familiar.”

That should have pinged something. Instead, I let it pass.

“I want this to be the one they put my name on,” he said quietly.

I nodded. “Then let’s get started.”

We began the next morning. Tommy insisted we work analog. No laptops. Just pens, legal pads, and the occasional Post-it war on the kitchen table.

His outline became our map. We started with *Early Life*, but every

time I asked a question, he swerved.

“I could tell you about my childhood,” he said, “but it’s all boilerplate. Quiet blue-collar father, complicated mother. First Communion. My sister was nice to me; she eventually moved to Chicago and married a banker. We see each other every few years at our cousins’ kids' weddings. Move along.”

“So, nothing formative?” I asked. “No school suspensions? No heartbreaks? No weird obsessions with volcanoes or frogs?”

He cracked half a smile. “I preferred libraries to people. That’s as formative as it gets. With a 4.0 and not many friends, I went to Holy Cross when it was still boys, and majored in English and Theology. I thought about becoming a priest but couldn’t write homilies.”

“You couldn’t write homilies?” I said. “That’s your line?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Preaching is harder than people think.”

“I’m not disagreeing. I just didn’t expect a guy who wrote *My Quarterback Mind* to be so... ecclesiastical.”

He actually laughed at that. “We contain multitudes.”

We moved on to *The Work*, where he came alive. He mimicked the authors he’d ghosted: the breathy Hollywood memoirist, the grizzled quarterback, and the spiritual CEO who talked about leverage and mindfulness in the same sentence. It was uncanny and often hilarious.

I’d start laughing, and he’d crack up too. But then he’d go quiet. Not sad, just... emptied.

“You okay?” I asked one afternoon after he nailed a perfect impression of the “faith-based space entrepreneur.”

“I’m fine,” he said. “This part’s just muscle memory.”

“Then what’s next?”

He glanced at the outline.

“Regret,” he said, and stood up to make more coffee.

A week in, I’d had enough.

“You know,” I said, “if you want this book to mean something, you’re going to have to stop hiding behind other people’s voices.”

He stared at me. “You think I’m hiding?”

“I think you’re performing.”

He didn’t argue. He rubbed his face and said, “You ever leave a story out of fear?”

“Every writer does.”

“Yeah. Well. Sometimes the stories I didn’t write were the ones that aged the worst.”

That night over dinner, he told me about a son he had never met. Just floated it out, mid-salad.

“His name was Eddie,” he said.

“You’re just dropping that in now?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he said, poking at his food. “That’s why you’re here.”

I nodded, writing the name down carefully. Then I looked at him, not as a project or paycheck, but as a man trying to say something true for once.

Later, I found a Post-it on my legal pad that I hadn’t written.

You only get to rewrite the past once. Make it count.

The next morning, I brought it up.

“That Romanian airport story, what were you reading before *The Interrupted Vacation* saved you?”

He didn’t look up from his notebook.

“I’ve never been to Romania.”

I blinked. “But that’s what you said.”

He waved a hand like brushing away a gnat. “Oh, right. No, I just made that up. It sounded better than saying I found it in a used bookstore in Weehawken.”

It sounded offhand. But something cracked. Not a lie, a fracture in the façade. A crease in the page before the story folds.

It happened late one night. We hadn’t spoken in over an hour. Tommy stood at the counter, writing. I stayed at the table, pretending to sort through

interview notes, but mostly watching him.

Normally, he’d scribble a few lines, cross them out, swear softly, and start over. But not this time. This time he just kept going, steady, focused, quiet. When he finally set the pen down, his hand hovered over the page for a second like he wasn’t sure whether to give it up.

He walked over and handed me five handwritten pages. No title. No chapter number. Just unfiltered prose.

I left because I didn’t know how to stay.

I watched from further than I should have.

I listened to men talk about legacy and leadership, and I knew I didn’t qualify.

I helped them tell stories about balance and devotion, and all I could think about was what I never gave.

It read like a confession. Not dramatic, not theatrical. Just raw.

He sat down across from me but didn’t say anything. I kept reading.

The ones who stayed, coached Little League after board meetings, flew home from war zones to catch

birthdays, and woke up early to drive their kids to swim practice made me feel like an impostor.

And the ones who walked away, who let the dream swallow them whole, I understood them. Too well.

Neither group ever sounded happy. But the first ones always sounded less alone.

I lowered the pages and looked at him. He stared at the sugar packets like they might rearrange themselves into something useful.

“This isn’t like the rest,” I said.

“It couldn’t be,” he replied. “This is the only one I couldn’t fake.”

“Who’s it for?”

He hesitated. Then: “Someone I couldn’t write for when it would have mattered.”

We sat in silence.

“You want this in the book?”

“I want it at the end,” he said. “No edits. No framing. Just let it sit there.”

He pushed the pages back toward me.

“Keep it,” he said. “It belongs with you now.”

The next morning, Tommy was gone.

No note. No call. Just the smell of burned coffee and the sound of his absence. His duffel bag was missing from the couch. The legal pads were stacked neatly in the center of the table, except for one.

It was tucked inside the manuscript, between the final chapter and the page he refused to title.

A letter.

It wasn’t sealed. My name wasn’t on it. But the handwriting was deliberate, slower than his usual scrawl. I started reading.

I don’t know how to ask for forgiveness. I don’t know if I deserve it.

I missed everything: birthdays, recitals, heartbreaks, and report cards. I thought distance would make it easier. It didn’t. I thought work would fill the space. It never did.

Watching from far away doesn’t count. Knowing your milestones doesn’t mean I was there.

I told myself for years that one day I’d explain it. That I’d write the truth, just once, and maybe that would be enough.

And then one day, I opened a book. Not a famous one. Not one with awards. Just a paperback at a used bookstore in Weehawken. And I read a line about how love perseveres, even through regret. The author was Ted McGinn.

I knew immediately.

So I called. Not because I needed help writing. Because I needed you to see me, even if I couldn’t say it out loud.

There was no sign-off. Just two words at the very bottom of the page, written like a sentence he'd been waiting his whole life to finish:

Love, Dad.

I didn’t cry. I didn’t storm out of the cabin or scream into the trees.

I just sat there for a long time, thinking about the last two weeks.

Then I turned on my laptop, opened a blank document, and finally started writing under my name, Edwin Thomas McGinn.